

Time to Move Over? The Future of Political Parties in Palestinian Politics

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Due to the perceived past failures of both Hamas and Fatah, a large number of young Palestinians have lost faith in the established political elite. Considering the extraordinary conditions facing the Palestinian youth, one would expect large numbers of the populace to have completely turned their back on politics and political organisations.

However, a growing number of observers have reached a somewhat different conclusion. While apathy with the political establishment is indeed widespread, it is believed that young aspiring Palestinians are becoming more involved and interested in alternative political movements, many of which favour Non-Violent Resistance. Potentially, these movements could weaken the hold of established Palestinian political parties.

The results of six in-depth interviews, supported by other similar empirical studies, largely confirm such a change. Nevertheless, it may be a little early to interpret this as the end of Palestinian political parties. In fact, there is still a lingering belief among the youth that 'traditional' political organisations can deliver results, if they act in a meaningful, inclusive, and principled manner.

Introduction

One could argue that the 1980s and early 1990s were the pinnacle of Palestinian politics. The 1987 Palestinian Intifada, which

was by and large a unified and predominantly peaceful act of resistance against the illegal Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, put the 'Palestine Issue' well and truly on the international political agenda. Yet the glory of those days was to serve as a harsh reminder of how hopeless the situation would become in the years that followed. At the beginning of this current decade, Palestinian politics was not only badly fractured, but animosities between the main parties were at dangerously high levels and the Oslo Accords, its critics argued, had done little more than draw new lines in the cartography of the West Bank. Many Palestinians felt that both Hamas and Fatah, through their contrasting approaches, had done little to serve the Palestinian cause. Furthermore, Palestinians' once inspiring leader, Yasser Arafat, was gone, and the mood in the territories was anything but optimistic. In such a politicised region, however, it would have been surprising if this impasse were to lead to the permanent death of Palestinian activism.

Due to the damage and setbacks Hamas and Fatah have caused, an increasing number of observers believe that young Palestinians are now choosing a 'third-way' of political activism, one which differentiates itself from the futility of violence and armed resistance on the one hand, and from the hollow process of endless negotiations on the other. As a result, numerous grassroots civil society organisations, which place an emphasis on the techniques and principles of Non-Violent Resistance (NVR), are becoming more and more popular. So much so that established political parties and Palestinian leaders are attempting to jump on board, in order not to be caught lagging behind.

There is no single definition of NVR, but

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generally it refers to symbolic forms of nonviolent protest (such as marches and demonstrations); noncooperation (including social boycotts, economic boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience); and non-violent intervention (ranging from hunger strikes to the creation of self-reliant institutions).¹ Some examples of NVR organisations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) include: the 2011 March 15 Movement, a youth-based protest movement that sought to end the Hamas-Fatah division; the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction Campaign (BDS), an 'anti-normalisation' campaign that boycotts Israeli goods and industries; and the Stop the Wall Campaign (STW), which protests against the path of the Separation Barrier and its adverse effects on Palestinian life.

Palestinian Youth and the Growth of Non-Violent Resistance

In order to discover to what extent such a change is occurring, I conducted six in-depth interviews in autumn 2013 with five youth Palestinian activists, along with an experienced activist in the field of NVR. These activists were:

- Issa Amro, co-founder of the Hebron-based organisation 'Youth Against Settlements' (YAS), which seeks to end Israeli settlement building in the West Bank, particularly in and around the city of Hebron;
- Tamara Tamimi, member of the Fatah youth organisation 'Shabibeh';
- Shereen Abu Helal, member of Al-Mubadara Youth (PNIY). Al-Mubadara (PNI) is a more recent addition to the Palestinian political scene and positions itself as an alternative to Hamas and Fatah,
- Khaled Karajah, fellow member of

PNIY;

- Mahmoud Nawajaa, administrator and youth coordinator at the STW;
- Salah Khawaja, prominent member of the Ni'iln Popular Committee, which organises weekly protests against the Barrier, and the repercussions it has had on village life and the surrounding agricultural land.

Furthermore, the polling institute, the 'Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre' (JMCC), kindly assisted me and included a question on my behalf in their November 2013 public opinion poll. Though this poll was not exclusively aimed at Palestinian youth, the average age of the respondents was 36, highlighting the fundamental youthful nature of the OPT. To help strengthen these findings, I also used the results of Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre's (NOREF) 2012 report on the political opinions of Palestinian youth.

The overall objective was to discover what it is exactly that inspires young Palestinians to become politically active; particularly as division, frustration, and hopelessness marks the setting they find themselves in. In doing so, it would become clear if NVR and movements associated to it have indeed begun to oust the 'dated' established political parties and their associated political methods. In a sense, the aim is to ascertain what place the politics of 'old' will have in this supposedly 'new' Palestinian society.

¹ For a thorough breakdown of NVR and its techniques see Sharp 1989.

² I had the opportunity to carry out these interviews during a three-month internship with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in East Jerusalem. I would like to thank Ingrid Ross, Shatha Abdulsamad, and Jakob Rieken for their helpful support and advice during my research. Without their assistance, none of the interviews would have been possible.

³ Both Nawajaa and Khawaja are also members of PNI. This is relatively common in Palestinian political life, where party and organisation membership is much more fluid and less formalised than in Europe.

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Attitudes to Non-Violence Resistance

Many of the interviewees felt that NVR had the potential to reinvigorate Palestinian politics and accordingly believed such forms of action need to become more prominent. Amro claimed there was no other option in trying to resist the Israeli occupation, in fact maintaining that Palestinians are "obliged to take part in non-violent resistance; if not, Israeli land theft will continue". Khawaja echoed such feelings. Though he does not fall under the 'youth bracket', his committee prioritises youth involvement. He argued that NVR is the best solution to resisting the occupation, "depending on past goals and methods will not help Palestinians move forward".

Others were slightly less enthusiastic in their appraisal of NVR. Tamimi recognised the useful contribution NVR can have, but was cautious against its potential being overstated. Taking the example of the 1st Intifada, she claimed that the success of that particular uprising owed much to the organisation and leadership that were set up after the initial months of chaotic protest. Accordingly, a well-run organisation is a necessity of political life, without which "popular resistance will achieve little". Taking the example of BDS, she asked, "what if it achieves its goals, what then"? Likewise Abu Helal, who was attracted to PNI by its non-violent approach to political activism, considered NVR a useful tool of activism – she herself often takes part in demonstrations. Nevertheless, she stressed the need for a framework to direct and organise such action. Taking note of what happened in neighbouring Arab countries ('the Arab Spring'), she maintained that the weakness of many of the revolts was the absence of a political organisation to guide the movements in a productive direction. In a similar vein,

Karajah told me that "demonstrations are good, but they need the framework of a party to really change anything".

At a more quantitative level, JMCC's November 2013 opinion poll proved a useful way to examine attitudes towards NVR. When asked which type of political activity they believe best serves their interests, 21.8% of respondents answered, "[j]oining a Palestinian political party"; 22.7% preferred the option of "[b]ecoming involved in a non-violent movement or organization"; and 34.1% opted for "[t]aking part in regular non-violent demonstrations against the Israeli occupation". In short, while it is clear that NVR is certainly enjoying much popularity, there are also reservations about its limits among the interviewees, and the population at large.

Degree of Apathy towards Political Establishment

Like many others, Amro was cynical about the Palestinian political establishment. Without singling out any particular organisation, he questioned the usefulness of, "just talking, holding speeches, and flying around the world". This perceived lack of usefulness also had an effect on Khawaja, who left the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) due to the "failure" of the Oslo Accords. Similarly, Nawajaa criticised the Palestinian Left, which he believed had become disjointed from society, and thus isolated and out of touch. He also reported a large degree of distrust within Palestinian society, reporting that the Palestinian electorate are fed up with "the high turnover of ministers who do nothing for the people". Likewise Karajah did not hide his frustration with the political establishment, claiming Hamas and Fatah were "corrupt and undemocratic". These feelings were mirrored in JMCC's November 2013 opinion poll, whe-

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re 39.1% of respondents claimed they did not trust any Palestinian political fraction. Added to this, many respondents in the NOREF report complained about a “culture of authoritarianism”, which, they claimed, had by and large been instigated by Hamas and Fatah. Thus it is clear that feelings of disillusionment are high and that large parts of the political elite have lost the trust and support of a large number of Palestinian youth.

The Function of Political Parties

Despite this distrust, the activists I spoke with displayed a willingness to work closely with Palestinian political parties and emphasised the important role such organisations can and should play. Tamimi, for instance, stressed the importance of future Palestinian strategies integrating diplomacy, the work of political parties, and NVR; each of which “are very important but alone they will not change the facts on the ground”. Unsurprisingly, for someone active in a political party, she also argued, “you cannot make a real difference outside of a political party”. According to Khawaja, Palestinian political parties can certainly contribute positively, however, they need “to share and not lead”. Along these lines Nawajaa added, “we are not against political parties, we need them, we complete each other”. For him, the STW campaign contributes to such a goal, bridging the gap between political parties and grassroots activities. Also Abu Helal expressed her respect for political parties and acknowledged their valuable contribution. Therefore, even though many of the interviewees had little confidence in the political parties of old, there was still the belief that formalised political organisations can make a difference. This was also evident in the above-mentioned JMCC opinion poll question.

Opinion of Palestinian Strategies

Also of considerable interest is what Palestinian activists deemed as worthy objectives. Interviewees such as Tamimi, Khawaja, and Amro were clear on what they wanted to achieve, namely Palestinian liberation and an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Although Amro, for instance, was still concerned with local issues and seeks to alleviate the hardships of his Palestinian neighbours, he does not lose sight of the “big vision, [...] dismantle the occupation”. Abu Helal also stated that her goal was the achievement of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. To this effect, arguing that life cannot improve under occupation, Nawajaa disagreed with ex-Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and his attempts to encourage state building as catalyst for statehood. In sum, while local issues matter, the most worthy cause remains ending the occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state. Accordingly, diverging too far from this path will most likely prove unpopular.

Summary and Conclusion

In broad terms, the following can be concluded. Both Hamas and Fatah are perceived to be elitist and their (current) political behaviour largely disregarded as unhelpful. At the same time, even though many are turning their back on the political establishment, young Palestinians have not abandoned politics altogether. This was pointed out in my interview with Karajah, who emphasised the difference between disinterest in the political apparatus and political apathy per se – considering the example of high voter turnout in Palestinian elections (e.g. 77.69% in the 2006 Parliamentary elections). Such a reading of the situation seems to have been largely confirmed by my research.

4 Issa Amro lives in the H2 sector of Hebron, which is under complete Israeli military control. For an overview of the humanitarian impact of these conditions, see UNOCHA 2013.

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Established parties need to change their old ways if they wish not to lose their ever-dwindling significance.

There is clearly a large amount of interest in NVR: every interviewee acknowledged its usefulness and the important role it should have in future political strategies. Similarly, 56.8% of respondents in JMCC's November 2013 opinion poll viewed NVR modes of political activism more useful than joining a political party. Thus, it would seem NVR is set to leave a permanent mark of Palestinian politics. Nevertheless, there was also broad agreement about what NVR can and cannot achieve and the feeling that, in isolation, its achievements may be minimal. Accordingly, the potential of NVR was perceived to be dependent on it being one of several integrated strategic components. For such a reason, many of the interviewees clearly envisaged an important role for political parties and appreciated the potential benefits that useful and productive political organisation can deliver. This feeling was also present in the JMCC opinion poll, where a considerable number of respondents (21.8%) viewed involvement in a political party as more beneficial than acts of NVR. This is important to bear in mind and suggests that NVR needs to be integrated into something bigger. It is also worth noting that Palestinian youth are attracted to NVR because they feel its goals are neither empty nor detached from the pressing issues of the day. In this sense, NVR organisations – in comparison to political parties – seem to have the 'moral high ground'.

Nevertheless, my conclusions need to be treated cautiously. Firstly, I only spoke with youth activists in the West Bank, five of which have been active in political parties at some point in their career. In addition, due to practical-, time-, and technical constraints, I was also limited

in who I could meet. I did not speak to activists from Hamas or any other political fractions. It may very well be the case that other activists, with different political backgrounds, are more sceptical about the potential role of political parties. Five of my six interviewees were based in Ramallah, and nearly all of my interviews were carried out fully or partially in English. It would thus be disingenuous to claim that I had collected enough information to irrefutably conclude how all Palestinians think or act. That said, I believe some of these shortcomings have been countered with the use of NOREF's 2012 report on Palestinian youth and the JMCC November 2013 opinion poll. Consequently, I hope my results provide some helpful indicators for further research and contemplation.

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